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ABSTRACT

Although many studies show that children who have rich early childhood experiences are better prepared for academic learning in school, many kindergarten teachers report that a large, and growing, number of children are not ready to learn when they arrive for their first day of school. This booklet, directed to parents, provides information on the critical role of parents in preparing their child for later school success. The booklet examines the current knowledge about school readiness; discusses the reasons some children are not ready; and outlines what schools, parents, and communities can do to help children enter school ready to learn. Also included are dozens of enjoyable activities parents and children can try at home that help prepare children for school success. (Contains 11 references.) (KB)

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Getting Your Child Ready for School

PS 028146

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Getting Your Child Ready for School

Educators and parents are increasingly aware of the importance the years *before* a child enters school have on a child's school success. The latest research on brain development confirms that good prenatal care, warm and loving attachments between young children and adults, and positive stimulation from the time of a child's birth really do make a difference in a child's development . . . differences that can last a lifetime (NAEYC 1997).

Many studies show that children who have rich early childhood experiences are better prepared for academic learning in school. Sadly, many kindergarten teachers say that a large . . . and growing . . . number of children are *not* ready to learn when they arrive for their first day of school. Too many of these children continue to struggle throughout their school careers.

Children cannot prepare themselves for school. It takes a caring family and a nurturing community to give a young child the things she[1] needs. That's what this booklet is about. As a parent, you play a critical role in preparing your child for later school success. Because your role is so important, the teachers and administrators of the school district your child will attend have sent you this booklet. It examines what we know about school readiness; discusses the reasons some children are not ready; and outlines what schools, parents, and communities can do to help children enter school ready to learn. The booklet also includes dozens of fun and enjoyable activities parents and children can try at home that help prepare children for school success.

[1] Because we believe in the importance of individuals, we often use the singular pronoun. To be fair, we alternate the use of "him" and "her" throughout this publication.

School Readiness – Two Children's Stories

Juan's first day of school seemed like a big adventure. When he walked into the classroom, he was happy to see some of the same children he played with in preschool, and others from his neighborhood. The classroom was decorated with brightly colored letters and numbers, some of which he knew from working with blocks and cards at home. There were things to climb on and move around, pictures of animals, and musical instruments to play. When Juan looked at the books on the bookshelf, he recognized several his parents had read to him during their nightly story time.

The time flew by as Juan shared toys and games with the other children and got to know his teacher. He came home bubbling with news for his parents, who listened as he told them about his day.

■

Karen was frightened as she entered the classroom for the first time. She had never seen so many other children in the same room. She wasn't sure how long she would have to stay, or why she was even there. The teacher was a stranger, and though she tried, Karen couldn't seem to follow her directions. When the teacher read a story, Karen had trouble sitting still. She didn't know people read books for fun.

By 9:30 a.m., Karen was hungry and couldn't concentrate. She hadn't eaten breakfast because her family had overslept and everyone was late getting out the door.

She tried to be brave, but a little boy teased her because she couldn't catch a ball and stood off by herself on the playground. She cried for a long time.

Though Juan and Karen are fictional, they illustrate a few of the experiences and feelings children have when entering formal schooling. Because Juan had some preparation before he entered school, he was more *ready* to be a student than Karen. Although some children like Karen go on to succeed in school, research supports the belief that children who come to school ready to learn are more successful throughout their entire school careers.

Being even a little behind can make children feel inadequate and can haunt them throughout their schooling. On the other hand, children who enter school confidently are able to develop and keep a lifelong love of learning.

Much of the research on "readiness" confirms many things parents and teachers already know: A child who is comfortable with other children, who can communicate well, who has some familiarity with learning and listening, who is patient, and who is well-fed and healthy is a step ahead of a child who comes to school lacking any or all of these advantages.

In the past, children were thought to be ready for school if they had certain *skills* — for example, if they could recite the alphabet, count to 10, recognize colors, and tie their shoes. Today, educators and parents know that children need to show up at school with more than a list of accomplishments to succeed in school and life.

The National Association of State Boards of Education notes, "School readiness is far more than academic knowledge and skills. School readiness is based on children's health, their confidence in themselves and their ability to work with others."

Children must be *healthy* because children who are tired, hungry, or sick cannot concentrate. They must be able to *speak and listen* because reading and writing are the foundation of all other learning. They need *self-esteem* so they can keep working when a task is difficult. And they need to know how to *cooperate with others* because no student can have the teacher's undivided attention.

More Than the Three "R's": Making Sure Your Child Is Healthy

> Children must have their basic needs for health care . . . and nutrition met if they are to be prepared to achieve in school. A child with an undiagnosed vision problem, or without the means to get glasses once a problem has been diagnosed, hardly can learn to his potential. A child whose intellectual development is stunted by lead poisoning cannot excel in the classroom . . . Nor can a hungry child . . . All of this is common sense. Any parent, any teacher, any doctor, any politician understands these connections. The puzzling thing is why we can't do what we all know makes sense, giving all children the essential and cost-effective early investments they need to prepare them to achieve.
>
> **—Marian Wright Edelman, president and co-founder, Children's Defense Fund**

Overall Health

Prenatal care. A child's health is affected by things that happen even before the child is born. Pregnant women who don't take good care of themselves, don't get adequate medical care, or take drugs while expecting increase their chances of giving birth to children who:

- ✓ Are low in birth weight, making them more likely to have lifelong health and learning problems;
- ✓ Develop asthma;
- ✓ Are mentally retarded;
- ✓ Develop speech and language problems;
- ✓ Have short attention spans; and
- ✓ Become hyperactive.

If your child has any of these problems, it is a good idea to consult with your doctor, your school district, or community agencies as soon as possible. Many communities have free or inexpensive services to help you and your child. If you don't have a doctor, contact your community's public heath agency to find out about clinics and other resources you can access.

You may suspect your child has a physical or mental disability if she develops much more slowly than her friends. If you do suspect a disability, see a doctor right away. Early intervention can help children with disabilities develop to their full potential. Routine checkups at your doctor's office or a local health clinic are the best way to keep children healthy — even if your child isn't sick.

Vision and hearing care. Be sure to ask your health care provider to check your child's vision and hearing. Vision and hearing problems are often correctable, but can worsen and interfere with school success if undetected.

Dental care. It's also important that your child see a dentist regularly — baby teeth need care too. Most dentists recommend that children begin routine dental checkups around three years of age.

Proper diet. Good health for children also means making sure they eat a balanced diet with limited fats and sweets and a good variety of dairy products such as milk, cheese, and yogurt; breads, cereals, and other grain products; fruits; vegetables; and meat, poultry, fish and alternatives (such as eggs and dried beans and peas).

If you cannot afford the food your child needs, you may be eligible for help from the federal, state, or local government. The federal nutrition program, called the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), distributes food to low-income women and their children. Food stamps also are available for many families with children. For information and to find out if you are eligible, contact your local or state health department.

Immunizations

Ensuring your child is immunized at the proper time provides the best defense against dangerous, even deadly, childhood diseases. Childhood immunization means protection from nine major diseases,

including poolio, rubella (German measles), pertussis (whooping cough), and1 tetanus (lockjaw). These diseases used to claim many children's lives aand can cause disabilities. Today, they can be prevented if children are : immunized. Is your child protected from these diseases?

Check with : your doctor or health clinic to obtain a listing of which immunizaticons your child needs at which ages. Be sure to find out whether youur child needs additional booster shots. If you don't have a pediatriciaan, call your local public health department. It usually has supplies of vvaccines and may offer free immunizations.

The latesst information about immunizations is available from the : American Academy of Pediatrics online at www.aap.org/family/parents/immunize/htm or by contacting them at TThe American Academy of Pediatrics, 141 Northwest Point Blvvd., Elk Grove Village, IL 60007-1098 or by calling 847.228..5005.

But remeember, no information you obtain online or otherwise shoould be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice off a health care provider. A health care provider who knows yoour child's medical history might recommend necessary variationss in treatment based on individual facts and circumstances.

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Muscle Coordination

Children need physical skills to be successful in school. Marguerite Kelly, author of *The Mother's Almanac*, explains: "The better a child uses his body, the better he can use his mind, because all basic mental skills are built on physical accomplishments." Whether your child is reaching for a ball, crawling, or climbing on play equipment, "he's programming the circuits in his brain in the same patterns he'll need one day to read a story, add numbers, or draw abstract conclusions," she says.

Children learn and master large movement skills at different times. You don't need to compare your child's physical skills with any other child's. Children develop at their own pace. It's just one of the ways children show their uniqueness. But it is good to give children the chance to practice their physical skills as often as possible. Fortunately, many of the games children love best — skipping rope, riding tricycles, throwing balls, or playing tag — help them learn and practice these skills.

Here are some ways you can help your child develop the physical skills that support success in school:

- ✓ Take your child to a park to play on outdoor equipment.
- ✓ Allow your child to dress herself. Especially at first, this will take more time, but you will be helping her develop muscles she'll use in writing and other school activities.
- ✓ Give your child some child-safe scissors. Let him cut up old magazines or cut shapes out of paper.
- ✓ Let your child color and "write." Give her lots of time to use crayons, markers, pencils and pens.
- ✓ Provide opportunities for your child to experiment with balls, tricycles, and jump ropes.
- ✓ Establish a regular bedtime. Children need plenty of rest to stay alert in school and maintain the energy to enjoy physical activity.

CHECKLIST FOR PARENTS

Here are some items to think about regarding your child's health.

To ensure *good* health, I make sure that my child:

____ sees a health care provider regularly

____ sees a dentist regularly

____ has had all necessary immunizations

____ eats a balanced diet

____ has an opportunity to play, run, jump, and enjoy other activities that develop large muscles and provide exercise

____ works with puzzles, colors, and child-safe scissors, and does other activities that help develop small muscles and fine-motor skills

____ gets plenty of rest

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Developing Speaking, Listening, and Reading Skills

Language, without question, is the key to learning. And from the day your child is born (or, according to some researchers, even before that), your child is learning language. Children who can't or don't communicate easily may have problems in school. In fact, children who fail to develop adequate speech and language skills in the first years of life are up to six times more likely to experience reading problems in school, according to research (Clapp 1988, p. 192).

One of the most important things parents can do for their children, then, is to talk with them. Everyday activities — from getting dressed to taking a bath to eating dinner — provide opportunities to talk about what's happening: "First, let's put the placemats on the table. We'll need one for Daddy, one for Mommy, one for Latisha, and one for you."

Listening is as important as talking. When you listen to your child (even if you think it is just "baby talk"), you are sending a message that he is important, and that his ideas matter. Make sure your body language shows you are listening, too. Face your child when he is talking; don't simply nod while doing other things. These are good ways to build your child's listening and speaking skills, as well as his self-esteem.

We all know that children love to ask questions — this is how they learn. So try to ask and answer as many questions as you can, especially those that call for more than a "yes" or "no" answer. For example, on a walk through a park, most preschoolers will stop to pick up leaves. You might ask how the leaves are different or how they are the same, or you might ask about how many things grow in the park other than trees.

Of course, children will ask some questions you can't answer. Write down some of these questions and look up answers the next time you and your child visit the library or on the Internet.

Provide opportunities for your child to do and see a variety of things. The more varied experiences children have, the more they learn about the world. No matter where you live, your community can provide new experiences. Go for walks in your neighborhood, or go places on the bus. Visit museums, libraries, zoos, and other community resources.

If you live in the city, spend a day in the country (or if you live in the country, spend a day in the city). Let your child hear and make music, dance, and paint. Let her participate in activities that help develop her imagination and let her express her ideas and feelings.

The Importance of Reading

Another important thing you can do to help your child get ready for school is to read aloud every day. When should you start? As early in your child's life as possible. Even when babies don't understand a story or poem, they love hearing the sound of your voice and having a chance to snuggle close to you.

Here are some tips for making reading aloud a success:

- ✓ **Make it routine.** Try to set aside a regular time — even if it's only 10 or 15 minutes — to read with your child. Some busy families combine reading with bath time, and others read when their child is eating breakfast (a real "breakfast of champions").
- ✓ **Take your time.** As you read, take time to ask questions. These short breaks help your child think about what you're reading. Asking questions like "What do you think the Pokey Little Puppy will do next?" can help build the foundation for reading comprehension.
- ✓ **Be willing to repeat.** Repetition helps children learn, and also gives them a sense of mastering a particular book. So even if your child asks you to read a book for the zillionth time, try to grin and bear it — sooner or later, she will move on to another favorite.
- ✓ **Choose things you and your child like.** You never know what book or story is going to become a favorite, so be sure you read things *you* enjoy.
- ✓ **Feel free to "edit."** If you come to a passage that's inappropriate or just plain boring, don't worry about skipping it.

If you want more information about reading aloud, try *The Read-Aloud Handbook* and *Hey! Listen to This: Stories to Read Aloud*, both by Jim Trelease (available at many libraries and bookstores). (For more book ideas, see the box on page 11)

These Books Can Get Your Child Get Ready for That First Day of School

Books are an excellent way to help children deal with their fears about the first day of school. By reading and discussing a book, children can have a "dress rehearsal" — walking through what will happen at school before the first day ever arrives. Here are some suggestions, developed by the librarians at the Princeton, N.J., Public Library:

Will I Have a Friend? By Miriam Cohen (MacMillan Children's Book Group). This book follows a boy named Jim through his first day at school. Everyone else seems to have found a friend. In the end, so does Jim.

Never Spit on Your Shoes, by Denys Cazet (Orchard Books Watts). A puppy named Arnie faces many mishaps on his first day of school. By the end of the story, he is looking forward to his second day.

Willy Bear, by Mildred Kantrowitz (MacMillan Children's Book Group). A child prepares for his first day of school, including leaving his favorite stuffed animal behind.

Welcome, Roberto! Bienvenido, Roberto! by Mary Serfozo (MacMillan Children's Book Group). Written in both English and Spanish, this book tells the story of Roberto's first day in school.

The Magic School Bus at the Waterworks, by Joanne Cole (Scholastic Inc.). A school bus makes a wild and fantastic school trip.

I Need a Lunch Box, by Jeanette Caines (HarperCollins Children's Books). This book explores how a younger sibling not going to school can feel left out.

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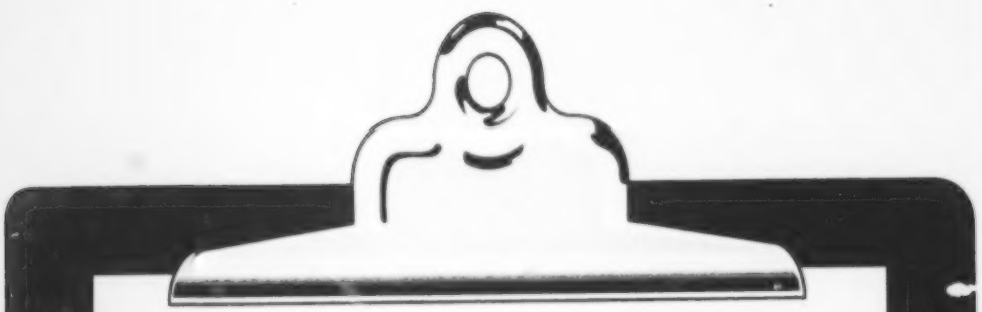
Get into the habit of making regular trips to the library. Children as young as 2 or 3 years old enjoy picking out pictures books, and older children are proud when they get their first library card. Be sure to keep books in a specific place and keep track of due dates to avoid overdue fines.

Finally, pay close attention to the amount of time your child spends in front of the television . . . and the quality of the programs she watches. After parents, television may be your child's most influential teacher. Good television can introduce children to new worlds and promote learning, but poor television can be harmful. Every hour in front of the television set is an hour your child is not playing outside, reading with you, or playing with other children.

Toys: Tools for Learning

"Play," said Maria Montessori, "is child's work." It is the natural way for your child to explore, to become creative, and to develop academic and social skills. Play helps children learn to solve problems — for example, when a wagon tips over, a child must figure out how to get it upright again. Children learn about geometry, shapes, and balance when they stack up blocks. And playing with others helps children learn how to work together.

Good toys are not necessarily expensive (young children can entertain themselves happily with a big box or an oatmeal carton), and children do not need a lot of toys. The toys that have entertained children for centuries — blocks, balls, dolls — offer many opportunities for imaginative play. A box of "costumes" (yard sale finds and scraps of cloth) can provide hours of entertainment. Scraps of fabric, boxes, and other things from around the house are the foundation of many creative art experiences.



CHECKLIST FOR PARENTS

Here are some items to think about regarding your child's communication skills.

To build communication skills, I make sure that my child:

_____ Has many opportunities to play.

_____ Is read to every day.

_____ Has access to books and other reading materials.

_____ Has his television viewing monitored by an adult.

_____ Is encouraged to ask questions.

_____ Has opportunities to notice similarities and differences.

_____ Is learning to count and plays counting games.

_____ Is learning to identify shapes and colors.

_____ Has opportunities to draw, listen to, and make music and to dance.

_____ Has opportunities to experience a variety of places and activities.

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Social and Emotional Skills

Children must also be *socially* ready for school. Parents can help their children get ready for school by giving them opportunities to play in groups with other children — whether in a play group, a Head Start class, at day care, in a preschool classroom or a church or temple school. Children who are used to spending some time away from their parents in the company of other children are more likely to adjust to being a part of a kindergarten class of 20 or 25 students. They are also more apt to be able to follow a teacher's directions if they have learned to accept authority from adults outside their families.

Children need *confidence* to believe they can succeed. Confident children are more willing to attempt new tasks — and try again if they don't succeed the first time. They need *independence* so they can learn to do things for themselves. They need *motivation* to want to learn, and they need the *persistence* to finish what they start.

To get along with others, children also need *self-control.* They must understand that some behaviors — for example, hitting or biting — are not acceptable ways to show anger or disappointment. Children also need *empathy* so they care about and react appropriately to other's feelings.

Here are some ways you can help your child acquire these social and emotional skills:

✓ **Show your child your love.** Small children need attention, encouragement, hugs, and plenty of lap time. Children who feel loved are more likely to be confident.

✓ **Set a good example.** Children imitate what they see others do and what they hear others say. Actions really *do* speak louder than words.

✓ **Exhibit a positive attitude toward learning and toward school.** Children come into this world with a powerful need to discover and to explore. Showing enthusiasm for what your child does ("I love your picture!") makes your child proud of his achievements.

✓ **Help your child make choices and work out problems.**

✓ **Let your child do things for himself.** While young children need to be closely watched, they learn independence and confidence by doing things like dressing themselves and putting toys away. It's also important to let them make choices, rather than deciding everything for them.

The Importance of Preschool

Study after study confirms the lasting positive effects of quality preschool programs for *all* children. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (Schweinhart 1994) reviewed several studies of children living in poverty and found that those who took part in a high-quality preschool program were less likely to:

✓ Be assigned to special education classes,

✓ Be held back in class,

✓ Receive welfare services, and

✓ Have a child out of wedlock;

and more likely to:

✓ Graduate from high school and pursue college or various types of training,

✓ Earn a higher income, and

✓ Own their own home.

In fact, according to the ERIC study, preschool programs provide a return on investment of $7.16, better than most other public and private investments. These returns come from reduced schooling costs (because children who attend preschool are less likely to need special education), from savings in welfare and in the criminal justice system, and in the form of higher taxes paid by preschool participants because of their higher earnings.

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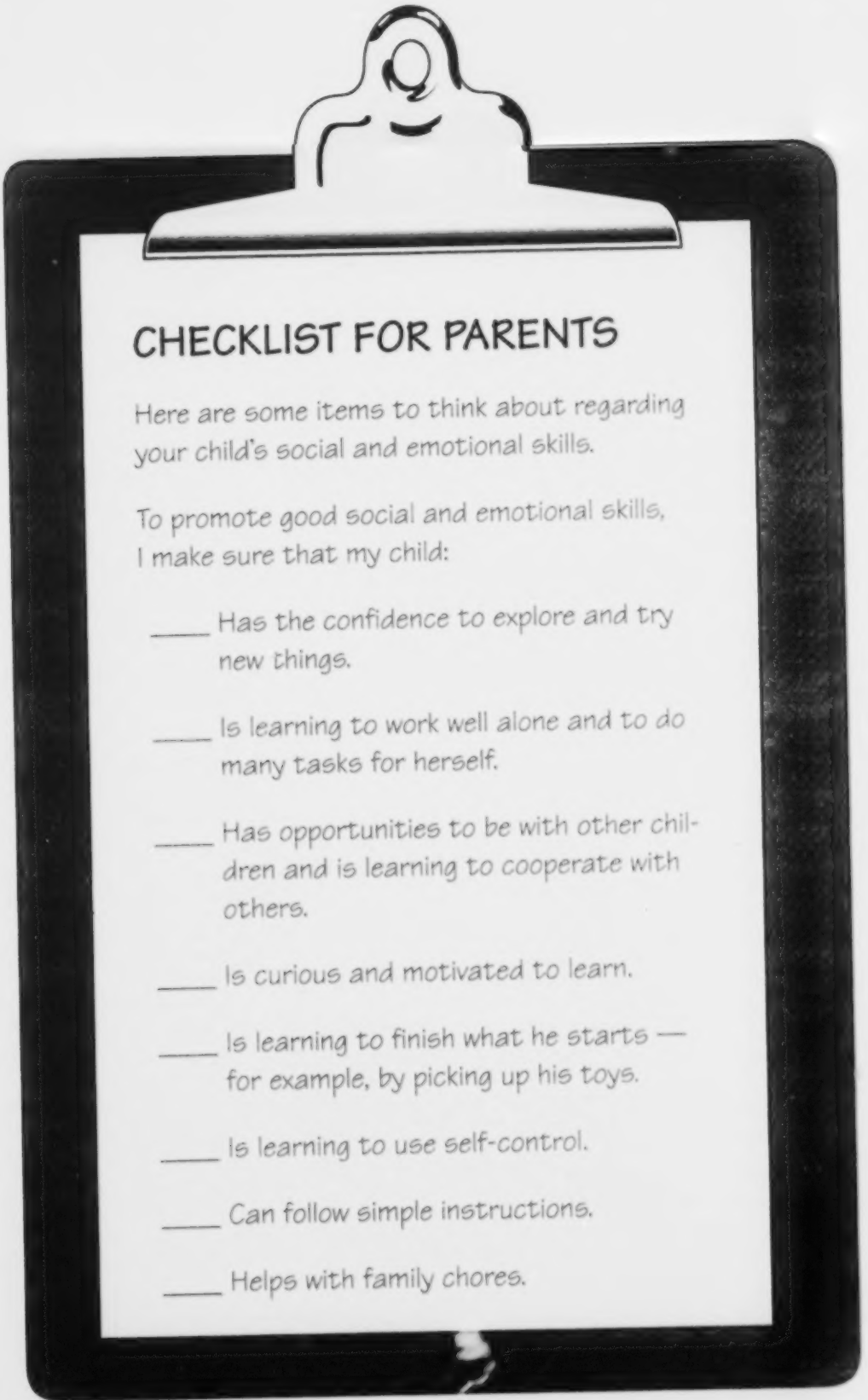

CHECKLIST FOR PARENTS

Here are some items to think about regarding your child's social and emotional skills.

To promote good social and emotional skills, I make sure that my child:

____ Has the confidence to explore and try new things.

____ Is learning to work well alone and to do many tasks for herself.

____ Has opportunities to be with other children and is learning to cooperate with others.

____ Is curious and motivated to learn.

____ Is learning to finish what he starts — for example, by picking up his toys.

____ Is learning to use self-control.

____ Can follow simple instructions.

____ Helps with family chores.

Getting the School Ready for Your Child

In today's ever-changing society, schools bear more responsibility than ever for the welfare of young children. That means schools have a special responsibility to make sure they are ready to help the children who enter kindergarten.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Washington and colleagues 1995), schools should:

- ✓ Be prepared to respond to a diverse range of abilities within any group of young children. Small group sizes with enough teachers who are skilled in early childhood education make it easier to provide the individualized attention every child deserves.
- ✓ Offer a curriculum and teaching practices that reflect principles of child development and learning and provide many active, meaningful learning opportunities that build upon children's existing knowledge and abilities.
- ✓ Make sure expectations of children are reasonable and age-appropriate. Even children who have received every advantage prior to school struggle when demands are too great, experiencing stress and having their confidence as learners undermined.
- ✓ Use measures other than tests as the primary measure for preschool entry decisions. Using developmental screening to detect a health problem or developmental disability is important to ensure early diagnosis and treatment, but tests should not be used to determine school entry for at least three reasons:

    1. Children are not good test takers, especially with strangers in unfamiliar settings.
    2. Young children are growing and learning rapidly; test results may change greatly in six months.
    3. Tests too often ignore language and culture variations and may not give a true picture of a child's skills and knowledge.

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Final Thoughts

The preschool years are critical to the long-term school success of all children. So it is important to everyone in our society that children start school ready to learn. By working together, parents, schools, and communities can ensure that this essential goal becomes a reality for all our nation's children.

Resources

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Thoughts to Remember

Other books in AASA's Parents: Partners in Education Series

The following titles are also available in AASA's Parents: Partners in Education Series. This series includes updated versions of long-term best-sellers as well as several new titles, all published in 1999.

- *106 Ways Parents Can Help Students Achieve*
- **Helping Your Child Succeed in Elementary School*
- **Helping Your Child Succeed in Middle and High School*
- *Helping Your Child With Homework*
- *Parents: Partners in Education*
- **Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening Skills: Keys to Your Child's School Success*

* These titles available in October 1999.

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